A DEFLECTED DUEL

By William J. Lampton

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"Why didn't I marry Mirandy Howe?" exclaimed Hiram Hostetter, flushing angrily in response to a taunt from the hostler. "S'pose you ask Milt Burgess over there why he didn't marry her!"

The little crowd loafing in front of the livery stable in the country town pricked up its ears and concentrated its interest on the hostler and Mr. Hostetter, Mr. Burgess in the meantime becoming more intent upon the corncob pipe he was laboriously constructing.

"How's that, Milt?" inquired the hostler in the same taunting tone. Evidently he knew more of the inner history of Hostetter and Burgess than the others did, for they were all curiosity and had no comments whatever to make. Both men were considerably past middle age and had come to the town several years before from the hill country, bringing no credentials other than a desire to better their condition and a fair ability to do so. They were sober, honest and industrious, and beyond that their acquaintances took no concern. The hostler in his more prosperous days had made a number of trips into the hill country, buying horses, and had heard some of the legends of that section.

"Oh, you git it out of Hi if you kin," responded Mr. Burgess, without looking up from his work.

"I never did hear the straight of it," said the hostler, the taunting tone giving place to one of soft persuasion, "and I'm sure these gents ought to know it just for the sake of your reputations. Don't you think so?"

"Well, I ain't objectin'," admitted Mr. Burgess, "if Hi wants to tell about it."

"You tell it, Milt," pleaded Mr. Hostetter.

"No, you do it, Hi," insisted Mr. Burgess. "I kin make a better cob pipe than you kin, but you kin outtalk me. You know that's what Mirandy al'ays said."

Mr. Hostetter's face flushed, partly with pride, partly with embarrassment.

"If you re'ly want to know the pertickelars," he said, "and Milt's willin', I reckon I might as well tell it so's you'll git it kerrect. You see, me and Milt was both courtin' Mirandy fit to kill and murder, and it was nip and tuck atween us fer two year er more. As Milt says, I was a talkin'er man than him, but he owned a farm, and there is women that sees more in a farm than perlite conversation, other things bein' equal. As fer me and Milt, disrespective of substantials, Mirandy liked me"—

"Hi was a heap sight better lookin' in them days than he is now," explained Mr. Burgess, whose personal beauty was not, to put it mildly, exactly phenomenal.

"Much obleeged, Milt," said Mr. Hostetter modestly. "But, as I was sayin', Mirandy kinder liked me a shade better, and with that and my talkin' I was neck and neck with Milt's farm. It kep' gittin' from bad to wuss 'twixt me and Milt, though we'd been pardners fer years, so's to'rds the last we got riled every time we met up with each other, and folks begun sayin' there was as likely to be a funeral on the creek as a weddin'. Mirandy seemed to injoy it, though, and kep' us on the tenter hooks, smilin' fust one way and then t'other, and aggin' us on all the time."

"Mirandy could be the aggravatin'est critter," commented Mr. Burgess half to himself and dreamily, as out of the dead past.

"Much obleeged, Milt," acknowledged Mr. Hostetter. "As I was sayin', things kep' gittin' more skeow-wowed, and me and Milt kep' gittin' closeter and closeter, and like as not we'd a clinched some day right where we met, but Mirandy packed up her duds and went over into the adj'inin' county to teach winter school, and when she was gone me and Milt shied off for awhile and didn't have no grievance ag'in each other, leastways not in sight. Mirandy, so we heard, had a sight of beaus where she was teachin', but she never told nobody at home about her business in that line when she come back three er four times visitin'. The school lasted three months, and when it was out Mirandy showed up ag'in, and was jist as smilin' at me and Milt as ever—smilin'er, I reckon, fer before we knowed where we was at we had fit, tooth and toe nail, fer her, right in the road. Neither one of us got the wust, but both of us got it purty bad, and so we agreed to shoot it off with our shotguns and settle it fer once and all."

Mr. Burgess stopped work on his cob pipe long enough to chuckle audibly at something or other which Mr. Hostetter's remarks had suggested.

"Much obleeged, Milt," said Mr. Hostetter, smiling himself. "As I was sayin', we agreed to shoot off the prize, and the live man left over was to git the gal. You see, each one of us was bettin' odds that he was the choosing people."

Again Mr. Burgess cnuckled audibly.

"Much obleeged, Milt," said Mr. Hostetter. "As I was sayin', when we agreed to the shootin' proposition we got a second apiece and a kind of general superintendent to manage the match, and we picked out a nice, quiet place over in Brand's holler, where there was a moonshine still once, and nobody had ever been there since the revenoos had scattered it to the four win'ds and wasn't likely to go, it was so dern lonesome. In course we swore everybody to eternal secrecy, but there's no tellin' how leaky a bar'l is till you put water in it. Anyway we was on hand prompt, fer we meant business, didn't we, Milt?"

"Ruther, I reckon," responded Mr. Burgess to Mr. Hostetter's appeal. "And we wasn't no cowards neither."

"Much obleeged, Milt," said Mr. Hostetter gratefully. "As I was sayin', we was there prompt, and the general superintendent ranged us up about twenty feet apart and give orders that we was not to shoot till we got the word 'Fire!' after he had counted three and drapped a hat."

"There wasn't no foolishness about it neither," put in Mr. Burgess, "fer me and Hi seen to it that they didn't put up no job on us by not loadin' the guns right, fer when they handed them to us, sayin' they was all right, we poured a handful of duck shot in each bar'l, so's there wouldn't be any mistakes."

"Much obleeged, Milt," said Mr. Hostetter. "As I was sayin', we was to shoot at the word, and we stood lookin' at each other, with murder stickin' out all over us till you could 'a' scraped it off with a chip. When a man is bad in love, he's the wust, I reckon. Anyway, we never said a word; no handshakin', no nothin'; just cold killin' was what we was there fer, and we was goin' to have it. Our seconds kinder dallied around as if they was waitin' fer somethin', but we stood there waitin' fer the word to shoot."

"It gives me gooseflesh to think about it even this fur off," commented Mr. Burgess, with a shiver.

"Much obleeged, Milt," nodded Mr. Hostetter in full sympathy with his late antagonist. "As I was sayin', we stood there waitin' with our guns cocked and drawed tight to our shoulders, and the general superintendent begun to count one, two, three, and we tuck sight with intent to kill. The superintendent stopped at three, holdin' the hat ready to drap and say 'Fire!' when all to once there was a rustle in the bresh, and Mirandy come bouncin' through and landed smack between the muzzles of the guns."

"Dern if I didn't think it was an angel drapped out of the sky," exclaimed Mr. Burgess feelingly.

"Much obleeged, Milt," responded Mr. Hostetter. "As I was sayin', Mirandy landed right betwixt us and throwed up one hand.

"'What air you plumb ijits goin' to do?' says she, lookin' first at one of us and then at t'other.

"'Goin' to shoot each other,' said the superintendent, bowin' low.

"'What fer?' says she, lookin' at us.

"'Fer you,' says I.

"'Fer you,' says Milt.

"Then she laughed so loud and kinder raw that it shuck the bark off a hickory tree standin' jist by the edge of the clearin'.

"'Well, gentlemen,' says she, startin' to git out of the way and talkin' in reg'ler book langwidge and as perlite as a basket of chips, 'don't let me interfere with the festivities, but before actual hostilities begin I think I owe it to each of you to say that you had better go over to Pleasant Ridge first and Shoot John Henshaw, for I am goin' to marry him next Tuesday week, Providence permittin'. Fire!'

"Mirandy stood lookin' at us, the superintendent snorted, the seconds laid down in the weeds and rolled over and me and Milt shuck hands and walked off the field, not sayin' a dern word to nobody, and we didn't go to the weddin' neither."

"It's a affydavit fact, gents," corroborated Mr. Burgess.

"Much obleeged, Milt," said Mr. Hostetter. "It shore is."

A Spoiled Climax.

There was once an old time "religious revival" meeting at a negro church near Savannah. In order that the revival spirit might be quickened it was arranged that the preacher should give a signal when he thought the excitement was highest, and from the attic through a hole cut in the ceiling directly over the pulpit the sexton was to shove down a pure white dove, whose flight around the church and over the heads of the audience was expected to have an inspiring effect and, as far as emotional excitement was concerned, to cap the climax. All went well at the start. The church was packed. The preacher's text was "In the form of a dove," and as he piled up his eloquent periods the excitement was strong. Then the opportune moment arrived, the signal was given, and the packed audience was scared out of its wits on looking up to the ceiling and beholding a cat, with a clothesline around its middle, yowling and spitting, being slowly lowered over the preacher's head. The preacher called out to the sexton in the attic, "Whar's de dove?" And the sexton's voice came down through the opening so you could hear it a block, "Inside the cat!"

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